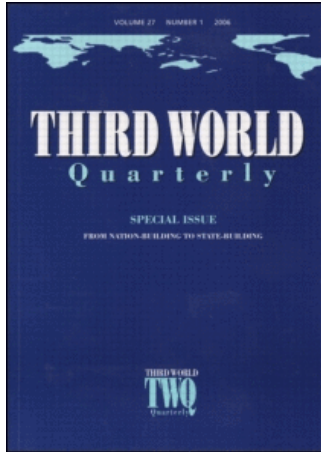


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Reconstruction as Modernisation: the ‘post-conflict’ project in Afghanistan

ASTRI SUHRKE

ABSTRACT This paper examines the post-war reconstruction programme in Afghanistan, arguing that it contains the seeds of radical social change. The paper analyses the tensions of the present reconstruction project in light of the past experience of similar programmes launched by Afghan rulers and their foreign supporters. The central argument is that the conflation of post-war reconstruction with a broader agenda for development and modernisation has brought out a wide range of tensions associated with social change. Simultaneously the prominent foreign role in the undertaking has increasingly had negative effects. As a result, the entire project shows signs of severe contradictions that are adding to the problems caused by the growing insurgency.

The internationally initiated reconstruction programme launched in Afghanistan after the fall of the Taliban in November 2001 was highly ambitious. In its minimalist version the aim was to eliminate ‘terrorist safe havens’, reconstruct the state and kick-start the economy; in its maximalist form the plan was also to develop and modernise Afghan society. The enterprise was to be underwritten by international funding and foreign troops. The undertaking was conceptualised as a project of social engineering—complete with timetables and benchmarks for international agencies to monitor the progress. In defining the task this way the coalition of statebuilders and modernisers was boldly challenging the obstacles ahead, although previous modernisation programmes in Afghanistan had demonstrated that the difficulties were formidable indeed.

This article examines the tensions in the present reconstruction project in light of the experience of similar programmes launched by earlier Afghan rulers and their foreign supporters. The central argument is that the conflation of post-war reconstruction with a broader agenda for development and modernisation has brought out a wide range of tensions associated with social change. Simultaneously the prominent foreign role in the undertaking has increasingly had negative effects. As a result, the entire project shows

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signs of severe contradictions that are adding to the problems caused by the growing insurgency.

The model

Contemporary post-war reconstruction programmes have several defining characteristics. First, they are rarely designed to merely *reconstruct*. Most entail significant institutional overhaul, whether called for in the peace agreement, in accompanying UN resolutions or in the programmes promoted by international donors and the international financial institutions in situations defined as ‘post-conflict’. Such programmes typically include provisions for building transparent, effective and accountable states. Usually this entails promoting the rule of law (including human rights and gender issues), liberal democratic institutions (above all elections), civil society and an open economy with market-based economic growth (though modified by measures for poverty reduction). More broadly these programmes reflect a vision of social progress—commonly called ‘the liberal peace’—where post-war reconstruction is wrapped in a broader concept of development and modernisation. Second, since the early 1990s such programmes have become increasingly standardised, reflecting cumulative experience that has been codified as ‘lessons learnt’, ‘best practices’ and guiding principles collectively endorsed by central institutions in the international aid community, including the World Bank, OECD and UN Development Programme (UNDP). Third, the underlying model of reconstruction and modernisation is derived from Western experiences of liberal political development and economic growth. Recent formulations known as the post-Washington consensus—which emphasises appropriate institutions and good governance as critical conditions for recovery and growth—are grafted onto the basic model. Finally, to make the model work, co-operative national elites, or what Bertrand Badie calls ‘importing elites’, are essential.¹ This is widely recognised in the importance which the international aid community assigns to the principle of ‘local ownership’. Yet this concept in itself accentuates the external origin of the programmes; local ownership clearly means ‘their’ ownership of ‘our’ ideas, rather than the other way around. The significance of foreign, mainly aid capital in financing these programmes further underlines the importance of externally generated knowledge, concepts and organisational priorities.

The ‘liberal peace’ project was not equally foreign in all the countries where it was introduced, nor did the reforms entail equally radical change. Some countries emerging from internal war had long had institutions of political democracy such as political parties and regular elections, a vibrant civil society and strong (if not accountable) state institutions (such as the army). This was the case in Central America, which partly explains the nature of the civil wars in the region in the 1970s. Other countries, such as Bosnia, were in many ways part of the Western development trajectory. Here the post-war reforms sought to further regulate ethno-political divisions and to accelerate the economic liberalisation that had started earlier and fuelled the

wars that tore Yugoslavia apart. In other cases, such as Afghanistan, the standard programme for post-conflict reconstruction entailed at its outer limits a declaratory strategy of radical social change. As one of the few states in Asia that escaped European colonial conquest, Afghanistan has always been more shaped by influences from Asia and the Middle East than from the West. Growing interaction with Western countries from the mid-20th century and onwards left its mark mainly on the urban population, a few areas selected for development projects, and some formal political institutions.

In the case of Afghanistan and countries similarly situated, the current post-conflict reconstruction programmes resemble a form of development model that in the 1950s and 1960s was referred to as 'modernisation'. A voluminous social science literature developed on this subject, which equated 'modern' with 'Western', and assigned Western capital, political influence and knowledge an important role in promoting the modernisation process. For an entire generation of these theorists, moreover, modernisation was seen as a package. Economic growth, political democracy, modern attitudes and Weberian rationality in state bureaucracies were all viewed as interdependent and mutually sustaining elements. This notion of development is still with us some decades later, as Stephen Marglin points out.² The model seems to have survived in a particularly concentrated form in contemporary post-conflict programmes for reconstruction. As noted above, the programmes are typically comprehensive, with reforms slated across all sectors. The underlying model of modernity is Weberian and Western and international aid agencies play an important role in designing, financing and monitoring the process. The main elements of the reform agenda are often identified already in the peace agreement—increasingly negotiated with international assistance—and further elaborated in plans submitted to donor pledging conferences, in donor-supported 'post-conflict needs assessments' (known in the aid community as PCNA, with the acronym serving as a recognition of institutionalisation), and similar documents.

The conceptualisation of modernisation as an imported package that can be implemented as a project of social engineering has been criticised on many grounds. Marglin and others who work in the tradition of critical analysis ask, most basically, if we have to accept the whole package at the expense of 'traditional' knowledge and practices. If so, they argue, modernisation entails a form of Western dominance that leaves the recipients little genuine choice and delivers destructive forms of development as well as positive ones. Analysts who focus more narrowly on contemporary post-conflict programmes have argued on grounds of effectiveness and efficiency. Leading critics maintain that the standard package proscribing 'the liberal peace' is unrealistic, internally contradictory, and more likely to generate new conflict than sustain the peace.³ Others emphasise the need to prioritise and sequence policy reforms rather than proceed on all fronts at once. The weak capacity of post-conflict states and the dangers of upsetting a fragile peace call for gradualism.⁴ In practice, reforms have often stalled. The premise and framework of 'the liberal peace', however, is a wide-ranging agenda of

reconstruction, reintegration and change. In Afghanistan, the agenda was quickly institutionalised in an elaborate co-ordination structure that consisted of numerous working committees, one for each area of reform and each equipped with secretaries, schedules and logframes for plotting results.

There certainly are historical precedents for this kind of social engineering. In an Asian context the present post-conflict programmes recall the modernisation programmes familiar from the non-colonised states of Asia in the 20th and late 19th century. Then as now, a set of policy objectives was identified, strategies elaborated, resources mobilised and foreign experts invited to help. The quest was for 'modernity', and 'modern' was equated with Western. In some cases modernity was understood as a package where sociocultural reforms were necessary to sustain the imported technology and institutions, as well serving as a signal effect of 'modernity'. Most famous in this respect are the reforms carried out by Kemal Ataturk in Turkey, but the less comprehensive reforms that accompanied the Meiji restoration in Japan, and the wide range of institutional reforms introduced by King Chulalongkorn in Thailand are similar enterprises.

The main difference between these schemes and the contemporary post-conflict agenda lies in the role of the external agent. The modernising reforms in Turkey, Thailand and Japan were endogenous initiatives and the policy process largely remained under national control. Indeed, the main rationale for modernisation was to selectively imitate the West in order to ward off the threats of imperialism. Nationalism was the ideological force behind the import of 'modern' institutions designed to strengthen the state and the economy and to liberalise (often by regulating) public life. The legitimising function of nationalism helped account for the progress made as well. In contemporary post-conflict reconstruction programmes, by contrast, international agencies play a dominant role. Since the early 1990s donors, aid organisations and the UN agencies have taken primary responsibility for designing, financing, operationalising and monitoring post-war reconstruction programmes, occasionally under the formal authority of an international trusteeship (Kosovo, East Timor). While foreign assistance places significant know-how, capital and, often, military force behind the reconstruction effort, it does not provide legitimacy beyond the utilitarian functions associated with the return of peace and the start-up of reconstruction. This has proved insufficient in contemporary cases of international administrations of post-conflict areas, which have all faced problems of internal legitimacy.⁵ The early modernisers at least had the moral authority of nationalism to sustain their efforts and undermine rivals, rebels and opponents of change.

Early Afghan modernisers

Afghanistan too had early modernising reforms that in some respects resemble those in the other non-colonised states of Asia. Standard narratives of the political development of modern Afghanistan start with the efforts of

Abdul Rahman Khan in the second half of the 19th century. Yet the first coherent, self-consciously modernising programme was promoted by King Amanullah in the 1920s. Fifty years later Mohammed Daoud, a tribal notable turned republican, launched a similarly ambitious reform agenda. The next and much more radical agents of change were the communists, the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA). The revolution they proclaimed in April 1978, however, was rapidly toned down in the face of mounting resistance and the Soviet decision to proceed more slowly.

As modernisers these three regimes had many commonalities. For a start, all seemed to be in a hurry, and launched their respective programmes of change with much fanfare and, in the case of the communists, also much bloodshed. All sought to strengthen the central state. All realised this meant increasing tax revenues and strengthening the armed forces. Amanullah was least committed to build up the army, which helped account for his failures.⁶ Daoud, by contrast, expanded and professionalised the army, both in his capacity as prime minister and later as president. The PDPA did the same and, with Soviet technical and financial assistance, increased the army to some 80 000 at its height.⁷ All three regimes emphasised development of the educational sector and—strikingly—all appropriated the rights and visibility of women as the central symbol of modernity. Only the communists explicitly downgraded the role of Islam in public life, and their initial stance was later toned down markedly, but the understanding of modernity in all cases came to mean change based on statutory law and secular knowledge. In the economic sector the state was given an important role as an agent of production, regulation and restructuring. Land reform was central. Amanullah promulgated the beginnings of a major land reform. Land reform was the centrepiece of President Daoud's economic policy when he served as president, and likewise under the communists. Daoud had also embraced some principles of state socialism by promoting large, state-supported infrastructural projects and development planning.

The modernisers differed with respect to political reforms and in foreign policy. Amanullah encouraged broader political participation and greater state accountability by promulgating a constitution. By contrast, Daoud in 1973 abolished the monarchy to proclaim himself president, and, like the PDPA, emphasised command structures and a one-party system to mobilise support for the state. In foreign affairs Amanullah and Daoud articulated a strident nationalism that focused on the threats to Afghan sovereignty from the East—first in the form of British imperial power; subsequently in the form of its legacy, the British-imposed border between Afghanistan and Pakistan, which denied the Pashtun on both sides territorial unity in a 'Pashtunistan'. The PDPA, by contrast, articulated an internationalism that emphasised close collaboration with the USSR and facilitated the latter's invasion in December 1979.

How did the Afghan modernisers fare? As in other countries, the programmes were contested. Unlike the experience in Thailand, Turkey and Japan, however, the modernisation programmes in Afghanistan did not produce consolidated gains that in retrospect appear as an irreversible

process. The early Afghan modernising regimes were all violently deposed and their leaders either killed or forced into exile. Their programmes did have some long-term social consequences (especially in terms of educational and institutional development), but much of the gain was destroyed or its beneficiaries forced abroad by the violence that accompanied the 1978 revolution and subsequent wars. The cycle of wars slowed down in the second half of the 1990s when the Taliban—a socio-religious movement committed to anti-modernity in all its aspects—seized power. The Taliban, in turn, were violently deposed, and the stage cleared for the present round of modernising reconstruction.

Such an inauspicious past warrants a closer look at the earlier modernisation efforts. The programmes generated tensions familiar from the literature on state building and social change. The process of strengthening the central state in conditions of feudal-like dispersion of power led to confrontation with locally based structures of power and authority. New demands from the centre were made on the powerful and the powerless alike in the areas of taxation, conscription and regulation of public life. In this perspective the recurrent periods of violence in Afghanistan's history can be understood as the by-product of a process of central state formation, not unlike the processes of European state formation in Tilly's analysis.⁸ Second, policies to promote education and economic development introduced in the late 1950s and 1960s set in motion a broader process of social change. New social groups emerged with demands for political power and distinct ideas of what constituted 'progress'. Failure to accommodate the emerging communist and Islamist movements in the political system and the growing political polarisation eventually caused the political order to collapse in an army-supported coup against the King and parliament. The events of the early 1970s recalled the warnings in Samuel Huntington's now-classic 1968 study of the dangers of an imbalance between mobilisation and institutionalisation. More generally the modernisation programmes, set in motion in the 1960s, accelerated after the 1973 coup, and moved forward with revolutionary speed after the communists seized power in 1978, created both fears and expectations. Some, especially in the urban areas, looked to the future with new hopes for social, cultural and material progress. But modernisation also has its discontents. As both Amanullah and the communists found out, even declaratory policy and partial reforms set off alarm bells among a wide range of conservatives who feared that change would undermine traditional values and the role of religion in society, and reduce their own status and position. In the countryside a combination of traditional patronage structure and uncertainty about the future could make the weak oppose change as well, as James Scott noticed elsewhere.⁹ One study from Nuristan provides a striking illustration: the villagers had found that established forms of corruption gave them some leverage over district officials and treated communist efforts to end local-level corruption with much scepticism.¹⁰

The outcome of the contests generated by policies of radical social change depended ultimately on the balance of power among the parties. Raw power

stemmed from command over money and weapons that could be distributed to the ethnic or tribal solidarity networks of the contesting factions. Access to resources, in turn, reflected Afghanistan's strategic position within regional and the broader international rivalries. Foreign governments and transnational movements were important as allies, supporters or adversaries in all three modernising periods considered here, but especially so during the communist years. Power also had a normative dimension. As sources of moral authority, nationalism and religion were important in framing the contest over the nature and direction of change.

All the modernising regimes were defeated, but the paths to defeat differed. Religion trumped nationalism in the struggle that brought down Amanullah. The King's defence of national interests against British imperial demands and his victory over British forces in the third Anglo-Afghan war (1919) were insufficient to stem the tide of opposition to his reformist rule. The religious establishment, Gregorian concludes, was 'alienated from Amanullah almost from the start', when he promulgated codes to liberalise the position of women, increased the scope for secular law and attempted to 'divest [the clergy] of all control over education'.¹¹ Deprived of religious legitimacy, the King was forced to fall back on a disintegrating army and a dwindling coalition of modernists. The British, smarting from the defeat in 1919, possibly helped to deliver the *coup de grace* by aiding the Eastern tribes that four years later rose in revolt and marked the beginning of the end for Amanullah.

In retrospect the ambitious scope and pace of the King's programme stands out as the main reason for failure. This contrasted with the young King's own 'impatience and experience', Amin Saikal writes, above all the failure to muster a broad political alliance that could neutralise the resistance from a wide range of power holders—'religious, ethnic-tribal, military, administrative and professional notables, who grasped the reforms' objectives and found them threatening to their individual interests in one way or another'.¹²

Daoud's presidential reform period took a different course, ending with a military coup that ushered in the Saur (April) Revolution in 1978. Saikal again invokes the failure of agency. Daoud 'repeated Amanullah's mistake of pushing through changes without first building and maintaining a potent reform coalition... [H]e failed to codify his program in a way acceptable to the predominantly traditional and Islamic society'.¹³ Other analysts seek explanations in the longer-term conflictual processes of social change that originated with the expansion of the economic sector in the 1950s and were accelerated by Daoud's reforms, especially in his capacity as prime minister (1953–63) and later as president.¹⁴ Developmental change had weakened traditional society and created new politically conscious social groups that the inflexible and later authoritarian political system under Daoud could not accommodate. This time, 'the real challenge for the state [was] not... the so-called unruly tribes, or fanatic mullahs', Oliver Roy concludes, but 'the radical militants belonging to the social categories created by the modernisation process (communist or Islamist military officers, teachers,

students and civil servants).¹⁵ In the escalating tension between the communists and the Islamists, the former developed a significant following in the armed forces and—drawing on the growing power of the army created by the preceding state-building and modernising programmes—captured the state.

Much has been written about the communist period, the party's ambitious revolutionary agenda, the rapidly growing resistance, and the violence which the regime unleashed and that multiplied in the wake of the Soviet invasion 16 months after the revolution was proclaimed. Some of the modernising reforms proclaimed by the communist were not new, and by themselves are insufficient to explain the opposition they generated even before the Soviet invasion.¹⁶ The violence of the PDPA had a decisive negative effect. The heavy foreign hand in the form of Soviet troops and aggressive warfare created massive displacement and hostility, and undermined the legitimacy of the government. The resistance groups, for their part, had easy access to external financial support, training and weapons; after the Soviet invasion they effectively invoked both nationalism and Islam to legitimise their struggle. The PDPA was reduced to a weak, rentier state that collapsed under the weight of war, as did the revolutionary modernisation it had launched.

There are several implications here for the current modernisers in Afghanistan. Three negative imperatives (and their unwitting sponsors) stand out:

- Don't overload the modernist agenda in relation to the modernist coalition that will carry it (King Amanullah).
- Don't exclude potential rebels from the political arena (President Daoud).
- If a militant opposition develops, don't let foreign forces lead the war against them (PDPA). With time, these lessons seem to be casting a growing shadow over the present reconstruction-cum-modernisation project.

The present modernisers

The project and its protagonists

The framework for the post-Taliban reconstruction project was laid down in the UN-sponsored Bonn Agreement of December 2001. Starting by affirming the principles of 'Islam, democracy, pluralism and social justice', the Bonn document was basically a script for transition to a liberal, constitutional democracy, served by an effective state apparatus ('competence and integrity') and a single army, with a commitment to 'social justice', respect for human rights, and 'sensitivity' to the rights of women. The script contained all the main elements of modernity as commonly understood—from the Weberian-type state to more recent additions of social justice and women's rights. The economic agenda was specified in subsequent documents. The principal documents were designed as comprehensive plans

presented to the donors with cost estimates attached (the 2004 *Securing Afghanistan's Future*), or as a contract between the Afghan government and the donors. The *Afghanistan Compact* agreed to in London in January 2006 specified goals, benchmarks and precise time-frames for implementation and authorised a joint monitoring board to scrutinise progress. Other documents were formulated as national economic development plans, starting with the general National Development Framework in April 2002, only a few months after the new government had been installed, and brought forward in the elaborate Interim Afghanistan National Development Strategy in early 2006.

When supplemented with other key documents such as the 10-year plan for legal reform (*Justice for All*) presented in 2005, the documents left no doubt that a near-total overhaul of the country's polity, economy and society was planned. There were only two, albeit significant, exemptions. Due deference was made to Islam in constitutive texts of the new order (both the Bonn Agreement and the Constitution), and there were no reforms of property or credit relations in rural areas. As the communist period had shown, these were incendiary issues. Even with these exceptions, however, the programme was an Afghan version of the 'great make-over fantasy' that Cramer observed in other post-war situations.¹⁷

Admittedly Afghans and donors alike were acutely aware of the constraints of both structure and agency. The country was ravaged by 25 years of violence and suffering from a fractious polity, extreme and widespread poverty, a traditionally weak central state and a history of resistance to intrusive foreign presence. Yet the quick military defeat of the Taliban, the consensus in Bonn, and the ready pledges from donors had created a sense of euphoria among large segments of the Afghan people as well as in the international community. Peace and reconstruction did seem a matter of adequate funds, effective organisation, political commitment and good will. There was little sense in the aid community that the country was embarking on a comprehensive process of social and economic modernisation that was inherently conflictual.¹⁸ And there were added reasons to be cautious: the ambitious nature of the post-war programme conjured up visions of huge aid flows. The cost estimate for *Securing Afghanistan's Future*, for instance, was \$27 billion over a seven-year period. As a result, hopes and expectations, but also fears among the potential losers, were generated with the effect of a pressure-cooker.

The transnational coalition that had to carry the modernist reforms was fractious. On the Afghan side, technocrats and modernists (many with long years of exile) were found in the government and among civil society (particularly NGOs that had worked with international aid organisations). Modernists were well represented in the early cabinets, but persons selected on purely ethnic and political criteria who were not committed to the modernist agenda were also included. Political criteria became increasingly evident in 2006 and 2007 as President Hamid Karzai sought to co-opt potential rivals, rebels or critics by appointing them as special advisors to his office and distributing gubernatorial and police chief positions in the

provinces. He came to recognise militias run by local strongmen, a move supported by the US military for counter-insurgency purposes as well.

As traditional Afghan methods of statecraft to co-opt and balance political contenders clashed with merit-based criteria for building a modern state, a deep schism opened up at the core of the transnational coalition. Karzai's strategies were increasingly criticised by both Afghan modernists and important international actors, including EU members, the UN supporters in the EU, the UN mission in Kabul (UNAMA), Japan and at times also the USA. To strengthen his position, Karzai moved further along the path of co-optation ('I am using my Afghan judgment', he told foreign critics), but he incurred the scorn of some Afghan modernists as well.

The international actors were likewise a large and diverse body, with sub-groups of coalitions, individual agencies and interests. The political forum of Afghanistan's neighbours and the large powers that had helped co-ordinate policy before the fall of the Taliban and in the immediate transition period (known as 6 + 2) did not survive beyond 2001. Key members, above all the USA, Russia, Iran and Pakistan, pursued national interests that did not always coincide with the Bonn agenda. The aid agencies were as often competing as co-operating, the elaborate co-ordination structure notwithstanding. For instance, the USA, EU, Japan and UNAMA were openly at loggerheads over the decision to build up local militias.

Among the Afghans several foci of contestation emerged. The most fundamental challenge came from the militant Islamists—the Taliban and their supporters—who opposed the entire project. Excluded from the Bonn Agreement and hunted by US-forces in the border region with Pakistan, the militants nevertheless built up their strength. In 2003 the UN's colour-coded security map repeatedly designated several provinces in the east and south of the country as having the highest level of insecurity. By early 2007 the conflict was generally referred to as an insurgency and had spread well beyond the eastern and southern provinces, with suicide bombings and violence increasing in Kabul and the northern and western provinces as well. The violence took a mounting toll on a wide category of persons. Reports estimated at least 3000 persons had been killed since the counting started in 2002, including around 1000 civilians in 2006 alone.¹⁹

Some Taliban allies had chosen to reconcile with the Karzai government, and some were elected to the parliament in 2005. But the hard-core militants appeared irreconcilable. Their declared aim was to free Afghanistan from foreign 'infidel forces' and establish an Islamic society, as they had tried to do before. By framing the issues in this way, and promoting them through a violent struggle, the militants pushed fundamental questions of legitimacy to the forefront of political discourse and action. As such, the militant agenda also framed the lesser conflicts of the post-Taliban order—of which there were many.

One set of conflicts clustered around the state-building agenda, which called for change with respect to key areas of state power, ie revenue collection, the armed forces, public administration and control over the illegal opium economy.

The statebuilding agenda: four items

Revenue collection has traditionally been a major struggle between the central Afghan state and the various local authorities, traders and other productive groups. As trade increased when peace returned after 2001, significant revenue was collected at the major crossing points, ie in the border provinces of Kandahar, Herat and Balkh. The battle over revenues focused initially on these three border areas, which were also the territorial base of powerful 'warlords'—Gul Aga Sherzai, Ismael Khan and Abdul Rashid Dostum. The central Ministry of Finance made some progress but under circumstances that revealed the limits of the state. The first two strongmen were posted to positions away from their home base, but apparently retained their local networks. And, while their Kabul-appointed successors did turn over more revenue to the central government, local authorities apparently collected more taxes on their own so as to make up for the loss.²⁰ From the central government's perspective the overall gain was small. Tax revenues doubled between 2002 and 2005, but the rate of increase was hardly impressive given that the starting point was near zero, and the total collected in 2005 covered only a miniscule 8% of all estimated income in the national budget.²¹ The rest was supplied by foreign aid. While the aim under the *Afghanistan Compact* was to almost double domestic revenue mobilisation by 2010, the current rate of 4.5% of GDP—one of the lowest in the world, according to the World Bank—clearly reflected structural constraints that were not readily removed.²² Weak domestic revenue collection meant that the modernisation project remained above all a foreign-financed and, to that extent, a foreign-driven enterprise.

State building also meant establishing a loyal, national army. A government with an ambitious reform programme would be in particular need of a strong army, as Kemal Ataturk had advised King Amanullah. Establishing a national army and a monopoly of force at the centre entailed a struggle on two levels. First, there was a contest for control at the centre, where the stakes had increased in proportion to the process of state building itself. Only the presence of international forces (ISAF) in the capital prevented a coup in 2003 when the then Minister of Defence, Fahim, was demoted and his armed faction scheduled for demobilisation. Second, there was a continuous struggle between the centre and the locally based commanders and assorted other local strongmen whose power base had formed during years of warfare. The first phase of the UN demobilisation programme was completed in mid-2005, although many leaders retained networks of solidarity and often links with the drug trade, thus retaining the capacity to rearm. Numerous armed groups that were not included in the first phase of the programme were supposed to disarm during a second phase starting in 2006. As noted above, however, the initiative was undermined by official support for local militias.

Building a state of 'competence and integrity', as the Bonn Agreement and subsequent donor demands called for, entailed reforms to establish a merit-based civil service and a state structure that was administratively and fiscally

centralised. A widespread notion about the weak Afghan state notwithstanding, this agenda was in one sense not a radical innovation. The national administration that had developed by the time of the 1978 revolution was formally centralised and in principle merit-based. The objective of the Bonn Agreement was to restore this structure, parts of which had almost miraculously survived years of war and chaos.²³

Public administration reform was a formidable task that generated widespread tension. Years of warfare and the collapse of a functioning central government had led to the formation of parallel power structures at the local level, often headed by local commanders, or the administrative structures were directly controlled by local strongmen. The government moved gradually to take them on. Initially appointments were made in high-profile areas such as Herat, Kandahar and Helmand, but the results were mixed as the new officials had to work against entrenched local power structures. Given the difficulties and aware of his own fractious coalition, Karzai increasingly used provincial appointments as a strategy of political survival rather than civil service reform. At the central level there were similar issues. The civil service was, for a start, much too large for the new requirements of public sector efficiency and slated for down-sizing. The old system, moreover, had been shaped by complex systems of merit and allegiance. A purely merit-based system conflicted with the principle of patronage, which remained the most important vehicle for access to the state and a share of its power. Old practices continued under the new order as new ministers brought in mid-level officials from their own solidarity networks; as cabinet shuffles rotated ministers, so did the critical mid-level officialdom. Donors reacted to the slow rate of reform by keeping up the pressure, at times by very direct intervention. For example, US and German officials toured the countryside to ensure that a merit-based process was followed in the selection of new police chiefs. The British government pressured Karzai to remove a notoriously corrupt governor in the south as a precondition for deployment of British troops. The interventions were only partially effective, and placed additional strain on the modernist coalition.

A fourth area of contestation was the illegal opium economy. The poppy economy had expanded rapidly after the Taliban was defeated to constitute well over half of the legal GNP. It sustained a set of parallel structures of power in the provinces and helped finance the insurgents. Reports from the southern and eastern provinces suggested that the Taliban were taxing poppy production in a regular manner. But the opium economy sustained a much wider sector of the population, from the poor farmers to the richer middlemen, the traders, the smugglers, the processors, and those who protected the illegal economy and its agents physically as well as politically. The opium economy had tentacles deep into the central government and was connected to leading officials at the local level, including, reportedly, a brother of the president.²⁴ Taking on the top players in the opium economy might jeopardise the fragile state structures and shatter political alliances that were useful in US-led counter-insurgency operations. The prospect effectively blocked efforts to attack the problem at its core.

The social and legal arena

The reform agenda also raised hopes and fears, expectations and resistance in the social and legal arena. At the leadership level the modernist coalition faced a range of religious leaders both among the *ulama* and in the parliament, where around half the members of the Lower House were affiliated with the religious political parties that had led the resistance against the communists.²⁵ As during previous modernisation projects, different visions of the good society collided and merged with deep-seated power struggles. In this contest the role of women, social mores and the nature of law appeared as emblematic issues.

The rights of women became a primary symbol of the new order and, given the Taliban's dismal record on this, an important *post hoc* justification for the intervention. Rapid growth of the independent media contributed to a sense of social liberation in the urban areas, above all in Kabul. The presence of numerous foreign aid workers created a dual economy and society in Kabul, with alcohol and prostitution in one sector all too visible in the other. The reactions were predictable. The Minister of Culture fought bitter battles along the traditionalists–modernists divide with his director of state radio and television; by early 2006 both the minister and two directors had lost their jobs. The murder of three female journalists, including two TV personalities in as many years, raised questions about the public role of women. While Afghan women activists complained of slow progress to Western reporters, other women differed. One careful household survey found that both men and women complained about what they considered intrusive and conflict-generating attempts by Western aid agencies to restructure gender relations.²⁶ As the sociocultural divisions deepened, the government decided to resurrect the Ministry of Vice and Virtue. A notoriously repressive ministry under the Taliban, its reinstatement in 2006 indicated the government's recognition of the depth of the opposition to sociocultural change and of the need to accommodate traditionalists.

Legal reform was another divisive issue. Piecemeal reform of the legal code and the judiciary had had taken place since the early 1920s, but each step had to be fought and the pace was uncertain. The modernisers had promoted statutory law, more liberal codes that borrowed from other schools of jurisprudence than the prevailing Hanafi *fiqh*, a formal educational requirement for judges, and greater uniformity in the court system as a whole.²⁷ The reform movement had been interrupted by the wars of the 1980s and 1990s and by the Taliban regime, which relied exclusively on *sharia* law. With the Taliban deposed, the reform process was restarted and the schisms reappeared.

Calls in the international aid community for the establishment of 'the rule of law' were widely understood to mean an acceleration of the legal reform agenda of previous modernisers. If successful, this would diminish the power and authority of religious authorities in general, but particularly of those conservative in doctrine and lacking in secular education. As before the religious community was divided, initially over the work of the Judicial

Reform Commission, subsequently over the appointment of Supreme Court judges, particular court verdicts, and the preparation of the 10-year plan for legal reform. The dominant role of an Italian legal advisor in drafting the Criminal Procedure Law succeeded momentarily in uniting the Afghan legal establishment, but deep-seated divisions resulted in a glacial pace of reform.

Ideological and power struggles merged in the much-publicised conflict over Supreme Court appointments.²⁸ The government had been careful to appoint religious leaders to the Upper House, where the prominent traditionalist, Sigbatullah Moejadiddi, was elected president, and the new Constitution (2004) formally recognised Afghanistan as an Islamic Republic. Yet the new order represented a formidable challenge in the form of secular and modernist Islamic influences and associated centres of power that constantly pressed against established religious circles and traditions. The capacity of religious-related issues to trigger a political crisis was demonstrated in two recent court cases. An editor of a human rights magazine was in 2005 prosecuted for blasphemy; the following year a man who had converted from Islam to Christianity faced criminal prosecution for apostasy. In both cases several *imams* loudly called for the death penalty and angry protestors appeared on the street to protest against lenient treatment of the convert. The intervention of President Karzai secured the men's release, but the heavy helping hand of foreign governments was obvious—particularly in the case of the convert who was spirited out of the country—and further inflamed tensions.

The mobilisation of discontent

Resistance to the Western-backed modernisation project expressed two rather different positions. One was tactical, reflecting a fear of being excluded from the benefits of change, while the other was a more principled opposition related to an understanding of what constituted a just and good society. Both positions could mobilise political support by drawing on a growing pool of general discontent that was already evident during the parliamentary elections in 2005. It was expressed in low election turn-out, complaints over the manipulation of votes by 'warlords' and human rights violators, the use of populist and anti-foreign rhetoric, and the victory of a candidate from Kabul whose main platform was to criticise foreign NGOs for tapping into the foreign aid flow for reconstruction.

The main reasons for discontent seem clear. It was as if the momentous events of late 2001, when the Taliban was overthrown and a new order established, had given rise to an implied social contract where the government—personified in the president—was expected to deliver whatever people meant by 'the good life'. People wanted the government to save them from abuse by local warlords, to secure the peace and provide prosperity.²⁹ While many villagers might be conservative with respect to change, they eagerly embraced the promise of rapid prosperity that was in the air as the aid agencies moved in and officials said huge dollar figures of foreign aid were in the pipeline.

Expectations of rapid peace, order and prosperity would have been hard to realise under the best of circumstances. As it turned out, the new order was neither peaceful nor prosperous for most people. Survey research undertaken a couple of years into the new order showed deep concern over unemployment and physical insecurity, especially in the rural areas.³⁰ Corruption was 'worse than ever', people said, as aid flows and the illegal economy helped enriched the powerful. In the southern provinces, villagers openly told foreign visitors that the Taliban regime had at least provided some order, and in some areas they welcomed them in to settle local disputes. Sharp inequalities in income and wealth—among regions and, strikingly so, within the capital—underlined the discrepancy between what was possible for the few and the reality of misery for the many.³¹

As discontent with the government grew, the foreign, specifically Western role in the new order increasingly became a liability. The new order had been welcomed by many as a relief from years of war and the oppressive rule of the Taliban. Yet the dependence on foreigners carried negative connotations in several ideological perspectives: those of nationalism, Islam and developmentalism. The importance of 'local ownership' in development was widely cited on all levels in the political discourse, often expressed in the slogan that, in rebuilding their state, society and economy, 'the Afghans must be in the driver's seat'. But, Afghan critics asked, how can we be in the driver's seat when, in fact, the map is produced in New York, Bonn and London, the fuel bill is paid for at pledging conferences in Tokyo and Berlin, and foreign experts are doing back-seat driving? Populists exploited growing anger against the numerous foreign aid workers whose standard of living was taken as evidence that costly international consultants absorbed much of the promised aid and had slowed down reconstruction. Afghan nationalism reinforced the call for 'local ownership'. While diffuse, Afghan nationalism is defined by pride in a country that was never colonised and in a people that repeatedly has driven out foreign invaders. The Karzai government's extreme dependence on foreign money, soldiers and political support grated on this sense of nationalism. From a different angle the militant Islamists specifically attacked the presence of foreign 'infidels' and the development model as illegitimate. In an international context where the US-led 'war on terror', invasion of Iraq and support for Israel's warfare against Lebanon had created perceptions of a Western crusade against Islam, the Afghan government's deep support base among the Western, Christian powers was problematic.

Critical views of this kind of the Western alliance resonated far beyond the number who actively supported the militants. They were powerful tools for focusing and justifying criticism of the government and its foreign supporters regardless of the underlying reasons for protest. Violent mobs were easily mobilised for public protest, whether on issues of general concern to Muslims (the cartoon issue and treatment of detainees in Guantanamo), local power struggles (removal of Ismael Khan), or triggered by a smaller incident (a traffic accident involving US soldiers in Kabul). Thus the carefully orchestrated attacks on NATO forces (ISAF) in Kabul, Herat and Balkh in

February 2006 to protest against the cartoons of the prophet Mohammed were widely understood as a political demonstration of the lingering power of Fahim in Kabul, and the continued command of Ismael Khan and Dostum in their respective provinces. The riots sparked by the traffic accident involving US forces in Kabul in mid-2006 seemed to reveal generalised hostility, frustration and anger, as suggested by an incident during the riot recounted by a US journalist. When one of the rioters came upon a package with an address written in English, he hacked away at it with a knife until all its contents of exercise books for pupils were destroyed. It was as if the English words represented an evil enemy, the journalist later wrote.³²

The most militant protest was of course the insurgency, which had been gaining strength despite—or because of—increasing deployment of foreign troops. By early 2007 the NATO force presence had become highly visible, with some 37 000 troops spread out in several provinces. While the civil affairs functions had expanded rapidly with deployment of Provincial Reconstruction Teams, US forces, supported by British, Canadian and Dutch units, had also stepped up the military pressure on suspected al-Qaida and Taliban targets. For a whole year from spring 2006 and onwards, coalition troops launched repeated major offensives (weather permitting). The most notable result was large-scale displacement of villagers in the contested area—an estimated 20 000 (extended) families in three southern provinces in the autumn of 2006 alone³³—and a series of egregious episodes of ‘collateral damage’. In two cases official inquiries of military conduct followed: when US marines targeted by a suicide bomber on the Jalalabad–Kabul road returned fire and killed nearly a dozens civilians nearby, and when US aeroplanes bombed a suspected Taliban area in the western province of Herat in April 2007, killing at least 50 people whom villagers claimed to be innocent civilians.

The scene recalls the military tactics used by Soviet forces in the same area some 20 years ago. Then, as now, one consequence was a steady stream of new recruits ready to fight the foreign troops. The loss of life caused concern much beyond the villages affected and prompted President Karzai to openly criticise NATO’s military tactics.

Conclusions

In some form or other the tensions discussed here could be expected in a process of state building and socioeconomic modernisation. In the Afghan case they were magnified by several factors. The comprehensive agenda for change generated enormous expectations that could not be fulfilled, even under the best of circumstances, and mobilised all potential losers from change at the same time. The prominent foreign, specifically Western, architecture of the project increasingly became a liability in view of the international context—where much of the West is locked in a deep and violent conflict with political Islam—and of the local insurgency, which is spearheaded by local Islamists with support from abroad.

How does the present modernisation project score in relation to the lessons from previous modernisers? Amanullah's experience, it seems, has been forgotten. The present ambitious agenda stands in sharp contrast to the fractious coalition on which it must rest. The transnational modernising coalition is divided by different interests, priorities and conflicting principles of legitimacy. It has a narrow Afghan base, and the international component is huge and unwieldy (with some 60 countries providing foreign aid, and 37 governments assisting in some military capacity or other). The most obvious result is a highly conflictual policy process with limited results. The government has been more attentive to the lesson from Daoud regarding the dangers of excluding potential rivals and rebels from the policy process. Karzai, as we have seen, increasingly adhered to an open tent principle of co-optation. The problem is that, when combined, the Daoud and Amanullah lessons are conflicting. The more Karzai tried to co-opt potential rivals in the state administration, the more he alienated members of his modernist coalition, especially the internationals, who advocated Weberian merit-based criteria for appointment. In its most radical form an inclusive policy would mean trying to strike a deal with the Taliban. So far this has been impossible because the government also violated the third lesson of history. Like the PDPA before it, the present government could not prevent foreign forces from fighting a war on Afghan soil. The Taliban and al-Qaida are the enemy in a larger US-led war on terror, and Washington has refused to negotiate.

The problem with lessons from history, of course, is that their application presumes a large measure of voluntarism, while policy makers operate under very considerable constraint. The Afghan government—itself divided between modernists and traditionalists as well as along ethnic and tribal solidarity lines—was hardly an autonomous actor. Nor were most of individual players in the international coalition that designed and promoted the reconstruction-cum-modernisation package. Nevertheless, both collectively and on an individual and agency level, an awareness of past experiences may help inform policies at an early stage, before the alternatives become limited to a few bad choices.

Notes

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